

County of Los Angeles CHIEF ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICE

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Chief Administrative Officer

April 19, 2002

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To:

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From:

David E. Janssen)

Chief Administrative Officer

SELF-HELP LEGAL ACCESS CENTER (SHLAC) (ITEM NO. 21, AGENDA OF OCTOBER 2, 2001)

On October 2, 2001, the Board approved a motion from Supervisor Yaroslavsky instructing my office to report back in 90 days with recommendations on how to add one or two Self-Help Legal Access Center programs within Los Angeles County. On December 18, 2001, a status report was provided to your Board indicating the need to consult with the Judicial Procedures Commission (JPC) before our report was finalized. To date, we have met with the JPC members and have gathered valuable feedback to complete our report.

Existing Van Nuys SHLAC Program

The existing Van Nuys SHLAC program, administered by the Department of Consumer Affairs, provides comprehensive services through a contract with the Neighborhood Legal Services of Los Angeles County (NLS) at an annual cost of \$313,000. Services provided include information on court proceedings and procedures, filing instructions for various court forms, workshops, access to technology-based assistance, and one-on-one assistance when needed. Additionally, an annual operating cost of \$140,000 is needed for personnel, utilities, and security services. Statistically, 50-70 litigants per day and over 1,300 litigants per month receive assistance from the Program.

Superior Court's SHLAC Program

The SHLAC program is not a County responsibility under AB 233, Trial Court Funding Act of 1997. Therefore, the Superior Court of California, County of Los Angeles (Court) has taken the initiative and begun development of an alternative self-help model that is less expensive than the SHLAC in Van Nuys. Currently, there are two Court-operated Family Law Information Centers, one in the Central Civil Courthouse and one in the Norwalk Courthouse. The Court intends to transform the Central Civil Courthouse's Information

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Center into a SHLAC by expanding current services. Due to State funding limitations, the Court's SHLAC program will be less comprehensive in comparison to Van Nuys' full-blown model. It will focus on alternative means of assistance and will operate with minimal staff to manage activities. It will offer videotape demonstrations of court proceedings, self-representation procedures, and computerized assistance. In situations that require one-on-one service, the Court will rely heavily on volunteer legal staff to offer such assistance. The number of litigants to be served by this program is estimated at 2,500 per month.

Findings

My staff visited both Van Nuys' SHLAC and the Central Civil Courthouse's Family Law Information Center and found both programs to be efficiently operated and well utilized. They also learned through meetings with members from the JPC and representatives from the Court that there is a great unmet need, particularly among low-income residents of Los Angeles County, for assistance on resolving legal disputes and conflicts through effective self-representation.

This need has been acknowledged by the Los Angeles County and the San Fernando Valley Bar Associations. In fact, groups from these Bar Associations, courthouse staff, judges, and community-based institutions have shown their interest and support for self-help centers and have already taken independent steps to set up a mini self-help center. Additionally, the Eastern Bar Association, La Verne Law School, and Mt. San Antonio Community College are currently working collaboratively with the Court and NLS to utilize materials from Van Nuys' SHLAC.

Additionally, there are many very successful Court-operated programs throughout California and the country. Two such programs which have received national acclaim are the Ventura County Program and the Maricopa County, Arizona Program.

Potential Issues

In spite of the Court's effort and responsibility in developing the self-help program, the JPC believes that certain unfavorable conditions may arise to limit the effectiveness or hinder its expansion if the program was to be operated solely by the Court: (1) the program, under the direct management of the Court, may appear to be less approachable/friendly to the public than an independent, third-party organization that specializes in providing legal assistance; and (2) the potential appearance of conflicts of interest will restrict the Court from soliciting and accepting grants and donations from private sources.

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Due to the effectiveness of the Van Nuys model, the JPC members strongly recommend that future programs be expanded under the Van Nuys model instead of the less comprehensive, although less expensive, alternative model being developed by the Court.

Actions Taken

The JPC and the Court have combined their efforts to identify possible future program sites based on the demand/need for self-help assistance in different courthouse locations. Through their efforts, which focused on the number of self-represented litigants in each area, the following courthouse locations were identified as prospects for future SHLAC programs: Long Beach, Torrance, Compton, Inglewood, and Pomona. However, issues concerning funding sources and program-related space needs and availability, such as the use of law libraries, vacant courtrooms, or other functional but underutilized areas of a courthouse, have not been fully addressed and will require further evaluation.

Additionally, the Court has taken steps to seek funding by: (1) applying to the State Model Self-Help Centers Pilot Program Grant; and (2) researching the potential for funding from the Criminal Justice Facilities Temporary Construction Fund to finance the facility or renovation expenses. Our office will assist by exploring the possibility of applying to the Productivity Investment Fund.

Final Recommendation

Despite the valuable service that the SHLAC program has provided to the constituents of Los Angeles County and the overwhelming support from various advocacy groups, this program is not a County responsibility. The annual funding requirement for each additional SHLAC program is approximately \$400,000 for contract services, operational expenses, and security services (depending on the location of the program). Because of the significant cost of adding additional centers, we recommend that the item be referred to budget deliberations.

Please let me know if you have any questions, or your staff may contact Wendy Watanabe at (213) 974-1136.

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